

An Interview with a Fire Investigator

Firefighters, police officers, and ambulance workers all rush to the scene of a fire. But there's another person on the scene that you might not know about. A fire investigator is there, trying to figure what started the fire and where the fire started.

John Green is a fire investigator. He had a lot of jobs in fire safety before he became an investigator. We asked him a few questions.

How did you learn to be a fire investigator? I have a degree in fire protection engineering, I have been a fire fighter, and I have had other jobs in fire safety. All of these jobs taught me a lot about how to read a fire.

What do you mean by "read a fire"? You read a book from the beginning to learn what happens in the end. But you read a fire scene by looking at signs that take you back to the beginning—where the fire started. This is called the "origin" of the fire.

What are some of the signs? Say you can tell that the fire started in the basement. Then signs in the burned basement show that the fire started in the back corner. Then you see that in the back corner is the electrical box, and you can tell that the fire started there. Then you figure out that faulty circuit breaker number 14 in the electrical box started the fire.

So the electrical box would be the cause of the fire? The electrical box would be the origin, the place where the fire started, and the faulty circuit is the cause, the reason the fire started. And that's what every fire investigator is seeking—the origin and the cause.

What do you wear when you investigate a fire? Usually I wear a hard hat, safety glasses, protective gloves, coveralls, and sturdy boots. It can get very dirty and very uncomfortable investigating a fire scene.



What do you do first when you get to the scene of the fire? First, I interview everyone there—firefighters, the building owner, neighbors, the person who called 9-1-1. Sometimes we call in experts like mechanical engineers and electricians to help us figure out things. The other thing I do is take hundreds of pictures.

What kind of person makes a good fire investigator? The fire scene will tell you everything you need to know to learn the origin and the cause, but you must have patience to work through the details. You need to be organized. And it helps to be a creative thinker. You need to look beyond the obvious.

Do you like being a fire investigator? I do. It's a lot like being an archaeologist. You dig and dig but you have to be careful not to ruin evidence while you are digging. And all of my experience in the fire protection field helps me recognize evidence when I see it. It is a very satisfying job!